

First State Adoption Day

By John Campbell
Staff Writer

CENTREVILLE – In celebration of the first state Adoption Day, five lucky children were adopted into three loving families at the St. Joseph County Probate Court.

At 9 a.m. Tuesday, the new parents of each child finalized their adoptions under Probate Judge Thomas E. Shumaker. Adoptive parents, St. Joseph County Commission members, county employees, representatives of the Michigan Family Independence Agency (FIA) and State Representative Rick Shaffer (R-Three Rivers) were also on hand to help the families celebrate.

Area resident Jeffrey Mallo finalized the adoption of his daughter Da'sha Tuesday morning. His fiancée Lisa Doyle, who has been raising Da'sha with Mallo, since the child was a month and a half old, also took part in the ceremony. When the couple marries, Doyle will also legally become Da'sha's parent.

"It was a lot easier than I thought it would be," said Lisa about the adoption process as a whole.

Single parent Letha Pernell also finalized the adoption of her infant son Rodney, and plans to finalize the adoption of a young girl named Crishawna next year. Pernell has also been raising Crishawna and her birth son, Dylan Ford-Green, who joined in the ceremony.

A Hispanic couple from Sturgis, Gustavo and Sandra Santana, finalized the adoption of children Elizabet, Jesus and Fernando, who were placed with them eight months ago. The couple's other children, Gustavo Jr. and Ericka, attended the ceremony.

Maria Eickhoff, an interpreter whose services are utilized through the FIA and St. Joseph County Court, assisted the Santana family Tuesday, as the parents are not fluent in English.

Before the happy families finalized the adoptions a number of guests in Shumaker's courtroom spoke about the joys, and sometimes difficulties, of raising an adopted child.

Judge Shumaker said a lot of positive things both the FIA and the courts do to help children don't get press. "It's always the negative things that happen that you hear about..."

Shumaker described adoption as a very positive process in which many good things happen for the children being adopted.

According to Shumaker, many stepparent adoptions take place in probate court although most adoptions still come through direct placement from local authorities such as the FIA.

The FIA is an agency that offers economic assistance and protective services to children and adults throughout Michigan.

Shumaker recognized those who would open their homes as foster parents and provide hope for children. "We need people who will open their heart and their home to children," he said.

Representative Rick Shaffer, who has been a foster parent with his wife Sarah for many years, said they were blessed to be able to be supportive parents and do foster parenting as well.

"It was a wonderful experience for us, something we look back and treasure," he said.

Shaffer said that he and Sarah received wonderful support from the FIA in their roles as foster parents and added that he thinks such agencies are the key to foster parenting and adoptive services as they really care about kids.

Shaffer challenged everyone who either serves as a foster parent or has adopted a child to continue their efforts and not to get mired in the heartaches that can happen.

Six-time adoptive parent Lynelle Peterson said she and her husband Bill had some difficulties with a few of her adopted sons and said it is scary not to know what is going to be faced in the future as what happened to the children in the past is sometimes unknown.

Peterson told the foster parents as well as the adoptive parents to make sure to make time for themselves and to keep a journal to remember the good days when a bad day may occur.

Peterson also said extended families can be a support for adoptive parents as adoption affects the entire family.

A majority of the children she adopted were old enough to know what was going on, Peterson told a touching story about one of her adoptive children who saw Judge Shumaker at McDonalds one day, recognized him as the person who signed the formal adoption papers and said, "I love him. "

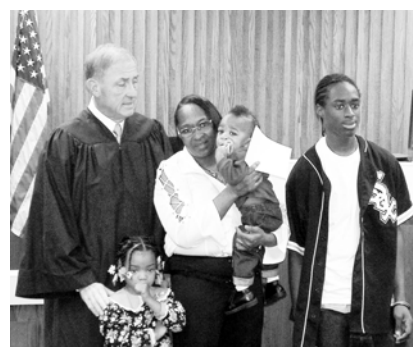
Jim Nye, Deputy Director for Field Services Administration for the Michigan FIA, said 240 kids in the state would be getting permanent homes with adoptive parents on Tuesday. Nye added that the FIA helps place around 2,900 kids annually in permanent homes. The niece of Nye's daughter who was adopted from Colombia 29 years ago was recently adopted by Nye also, as the child unfortunately lost her second parent.

"There's always kids available," he said.



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Three families finalized the adoption of five children Tuesday morning as part of Michigan's first Adoption Day celebration. Above: Lisa Doyle and Jeffrey Mallo stand near Judge Thomas Shumaker (right) with their newly adopted daughter Da'sha. Below: Single-parent Letha Parnell holds her newly adopted son Rodney. From left to right: Judge Shumaker, Crishawna (who Parnell plans to finalize adoption for next year). Letha Parnell, Rodney Ford-Green and Parnell's son Dylan Ford-Green.



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